

ENDURANCE



BASICS

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Endurance riding is a way to see the country, bond with your horse, and make good friends.

The sport of endurance riding (governed by the American Endurance Ride Conference) is a great way to spend many hours with your equine partner. Equestrians of all ages, from all walks of life, participate and are consequently drawn together by the common thread of enjoying and safeguarding the welfare of their horses while traversing many miles of beautiful horse trails. Riders participate to test their ability as equestrians and to test their horses' athleticism. Some compete to win, and others ride just to complete.

The American Endurance Ride Conference (AERC), established in 1972, evolved when Wendell Robie and several friends challenged the 100-mile trail between Lake Tahoe and Auburn, California, and completed in less than 24 hours. That 1955 ride became the Western States Trail Ride, better known as the Tevis, and still exists today.

In the United States and Canada, AERC sanctions over 700 rides a year. The distances range from 25 to 100 miles in one day, two-day events and pioneer rides of three or more days of competition. Distances less than 50 miles are

considered limited distance, or LD for short.

While AERC-sanctioned events can be characterized as races, the mandated prizes are completion awards, and a much-coveted Best Condition (BC) award that is open to the first ten finishers. Horses and riders accumulate points toward year-end awards and as horse/rider teams in their respective weight divisions. Weight divisions are designated by rider's weight with tack: featherweight (up to 160 pounds); lightweight (161 to 185 pounds); middleweight (186 to 210 pounds); heavyweight (211 pounds and up); and junior division (less than 16 years old).

Whether you want to ride to complete or ride to win, the horse's welfare is paramount. It takes years to develop the horse's body — tendons and ligaments — before you can ask for the high performance required of a horse to win a 50-mile event or even complete a 100-miler. After six months of training, the heart, lungs, and spirit may say, "Yes!" but the rest of the body may not be ready for the demands of even a fast LD.

Learn all you can about the sport before you participate. Besides reading through the educational section and rider's handbook provided on www.aerc.org Web site, it is highly recommended that you attend a few rides to observe and ask questions. Better yet, volunteer as a scribe for one of the veterinarians working the ride.

While at the ride, ask around to find out if any riders live near you and would help you learn. Endurance riders are a gregarious group of people and they like to share what they know about the sport. You may actually be doing the person a favor because endurance riders often enjoy company on the trail.

THE GAME

The horse (or mule) must be at least four years old to participate in an LD and five years old to enter a 50-mile or longer ride.

Although many different breeds participate, it is the Arabian, Half-Arabian, and Anglo-Arabian horses that are best suited for endurance riding. Their streamlined build and ability to recover quickly are paramount in advancing through a ride.

Each distance starts with all competitors leaving at the same time, usually at a trot. Your normally calm, gentle horse may suddenly become this wild animal you never knew before. So consider checking in with the timer prior to the start, but leaving your horse tacked but secured behind your

trailer where he can't see the start. Once everyone, or most everyone has left, mount up and ease down the trail.

One of the hardest things to do is not to get caught up in someone else's ride plan. You must ride your horse as you have ridden in training and conditioning. Just because your horse thinks he can race with the front-runners doesn't mean it is in his best interest to do so. Veteran riders call it "big brain, little brain." You have the big brain to make the right decisions for your horse that has the little brain and doesn't realize this ride is 25 or 30 or 50 miles long.

Throughout the course, there are vet checks, at which the horses must pass veterinary inspection. Sometimes all the checks are in base camp; at other times you have to put anything you or your horse might need in a truck or trailer to be hauled to the out-check (like buckets, feed, hay, your food and water, raincoat, electrolytes, sponge, etc.).

There is no minimum time limit, but a 50-mile ride must be completed in 12 hours and the 100-mile distance in 24 hours. This includes the mandatory holds and the time it takes to "pulse down" (your horse's heart rate drops to, for example, at least 64 beats per minute) before entering the vet exam area and starting the mandatory hold time.

The winner is the first horse/rider to finish the prescribed, marked trail, with the horse judged "fit to continue" by the veterinarian or veterinary team.

The maximum time limit for the LD rides depends on the distance. And, the winner isn't necessarily the first across the finish line, but rather the first horse to cross the finish line and recover to the required pulse rate (usually 64 bpm) and be judged "fit to continue."



Trail markings vary from one ride or even region to another. Sometimes the ribbons or markers will always be on your right, except where there is a turn; sometimes management has to place markers wherever they can find a place to attach them along the trail. It is imperative that you attend the ride meetings so that you understand how each course is marked.





Although it is a competition, endurance isn't just about winning. It is about bringing your horse along slowly, training his body as well as his mind, building a partnership of trust and willingness, and enjoying the miles together. This horse's name is **The Secret Agent** (Islamorada x Shayannah NA), and he is owned and ridden by Linda Hamrick of Indiana. She's started him slowly, completing approximately 30 limited-distance courses over a span of two-and-a-half years, before introducing him to 50-milers this year.

To get an idea of the times previous rides were completed at the venue you are considering, look up ride results on AERC's Web site. (The ride time is the actual time from start to finish, less the mandatory holds.) Note the winning time as well as the time of the last rider to complete. There's no shame in completing last, or not completing at all. The only instance when you should feel ashamed is if you over-ride your horse to satisfy your ego. AERC's motto is "To Finish Is To Win." The sport is all about enjoying time with your horse, accomplishing personal goals for you and your horse, and spending time with fellow riders, all of whom take their horses' welfare seriously.

Most rides and AERC sanctioning per se don't offer any monetary awards. So, you achieve no monetary gain unless you are competing on a registered Arabian, Half-Arabian, or Anglo-Arabian that is Sweepstakes nominated, in an event also sanctioned by the Arabian Horse Association. Or if you compete in one of the rare rides offering cash rewards. Normally you will get a T-shirt or some token award for completing, but the real reward is in completing the prescribed course with a healthy, sound, and happy horse.

You don't have to be a top contender to enjoy the sport, and you don't have to ride a 100-mile course. The LD ride was designed to introduce young horses and/or new riders to the sport, but, it too has evolved. Because of time constraints, some riders can't or don't want to ride longer distances. So

LD has its own year-end award program.

Once you have your horse conditioned well enough to compete — most horses that are trail ridden or worked frequently, are capable of completing a non-demanding 25-mile ride — you can check with the AERC office or on their Web site for rides nearby. You might be surprised to find one within a few hours' drive.

CONDITIONING YOUR HORSE

Learning to take your horse's pulse, temperature, and respiration, and checking for dehydration, is the first step. The progress of the conditioning is based on these and other factors.

What is your horse's resting pulse (standing quietly in his stall)? Typically the heart rate is 28-40 beats per minute (bpm). When you stop working the horse, how quickly does the heart rate drop?

In an endurance ride, before beginning your mandatory hold and entering a vet check during a ride, the pulse must be, for example, 64 bpm or less. It shouldn't take more than 8-12 minutes for your horse to drop to 64 after you halt the work. If it takes longer to drop, you need to find out why. Is your horse not in shape for the distance and speed you are asking or is he in pain/discomfort?

Endurance rider Tom Swift suggests, "Ride with a heart rate monitor and pay attention to how fast the horse recovers. If the horse's pulse rate doesn't drop to 64 beats per minute within 10-15 minutes of ceasing work, you are over-riding him."

Heart rate monitors are a wonderful tool because you can see on a watch-type band that you wear on your wrist what your horse's heart rate is at all times. But, if the battery goes dead or you forget to put the device on, you need to know how to take the pulse. Using a stethoscope placed on the lower, left side, just in front of the girth, count the beats (lub-dub is one beat) for 15 seconds and multiply that by four. For example, 20 beats in 15 seconds would mean the horse's heart rate is 60 bpm.

Checking your horse's temperature isn't necessary unless you suspect a problem. Normal temperature for a horse is 99.0° F plus or minus 2 degrees. With work, the temperature will rise, but anything over 103° F is cause to be concerned.

Respiration, or rather the number of breaths the horse takes in a minute, is used as one of many tools to assess the horse's condition. Resting respiration can vary depending on if the weather is hot or humid, but generally the resting rate